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BANGLADESH: Tensions

BANGLADESH: Tension rising in the country ahead of major Hindu festival

The ruling Awami League is no longer a secular party that protects minorities, Hindu leaders allege

By Emran Hossain

UCA News (16.10.2023) – Tension ran high in Muslim-majority Bangladesh following hate speeches and violence targeting minority Hindus led to a confrontation between community leaders and the ruling Awami League government ahead of Durga Puja, the biggest annual Hindu religious festival.

On Oct. 15, a Hindu leader filed a case against 400-500 unidentified people for an attack on a protest rally of Hindus in Cumilla district in southeast Bangladesh.

Tapan Baksi, Cumilla unit secretary of Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC), the country's largest minority forum, filed a case alleging that three Hindus were hurt in the attack.

The Hindus were reportedly protesting against what they say was a "defamatory" remark by AKM Bahauddin Bahar, a Muslim lawmaker from the ruling party, during a public program on Oct. 4.

Bahar allegedly urged Hindus to hold "an alcohol-free Durga Puja," which enraged the community.

Baksi's statement claimed the perpetrators of the violence were members of the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) and Bangladesh Jubo League (BCL), the student front and youth wing respectively of the Awami League.

The attackers allegedly carried banners asking Hindus to celebrate the festival in a "chaste manner" frustrating Hindus further.

During the rally, the protesters also expressed their anger over another comment made by a Muslim politician in late September. Mohammad Faisal Biplob, mayor of Munshiganj, a central district, called the local lawmaker, Mrinal Kanti Das, a "malaun" – a slang term for Hindus.

On Oct. 15, separate Hindu groups threatened to enforce tougher movements over hate speeches and attacks on Hindus. They also accused the government of trying to incite violence during Durga Puja.

Hindu leaders say they are frustrated with the ruling party which failed to protect them by keeping pre-election pledges

amid political tension and a sense of insecurity among minorities ahead of the upcoming national election.

“The minority people have now realized that AL, the party that boasts about its secular stance, often branding its opponents Islamists, is not their protector but attacker,” Bikash Saha alleged.

On Oct. 15, the BHBCUC leaders threatened to toughen the movement if the attackers were not punished.

Cumilla Kotwali police station’s officer-in-charge Ahammad Sanjur Morshed confirmed the filing of the case and the arrest of two men linked to the ruling party’s front organizations.

Bangladesh Puja Udjapan Parishad, an apex Hindu religious body that oversees nationwide Puja celebrations, expressed its fear during a media briefing of a repeat of the anti-Hindu violence in 2021 when about 100 Puja venues were vandalized over rumors of Quran desecration.

Hindus have made preparations to celebrate the festival at 32,168 venues during the five-day Durga Puja beginning on Oct. 20, it stated.

In a written statement, the group said the celebration honors goddess Durga, who descended on earth to eliminate evil, but they are now “surrounded by evil” referring to the spread of communalism.

The group claimed that between October 2022 to this September, a total of 35 attacks on Hindu temples and properties were reported in the media. At least six were killed in the attacks.

Bangladesh Hindu Bouddha Christian Kalyan Front, another minority group, in a press conference held in capital Dhaka on Oct. 15 alleged that the ruling party might incite violence against Hindus during Durga Puja to frame its opponents ahead

of the national election to be held by next January.

About 91 percent of Bangladesh's more than 169 million people are Muslims, according to the 2022 national census. About 8 percent are Hindus and the rest belong to other faiths including Buddhism and Christianity.

Photo: Durga Puja Festival (Wikimedia)

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